

The Society for the History of Astronomy
2022 Spring Welcome Back Conference
Saturday, 12th March.

“Lockdown but not shut down”



Delegates are welcomed to the 2022 Spring Conference. Image Richard Severn

The *Society* for the History of Astronomy (SHA) has successfully held a face to face membership meeting for the first time since October 2019, when fifty members plus honoured guest gathered at the Birmingham Midland Institute, Birmingham in March. The meeting was however conducted with covid-19 infection prevention measures in place, and in use on the day. Social distance requirements were helped by the meeting being staged in the large Lyttelton lecture theatre, enabling delegates to spread out in the seating safely, and as required.

The Society and this particular meeting were sadly not immune to the effects of the pandemic or the sad events taking place in the Ukraine. Thus certain speakers were forced to miss the meeting and have arranged to speak at a future SHA event. Nonetheless those members and guests who had made the journey to Birmingham were treated to a broad range of very informative lectures and presentations, from a group of accomplished historians and academics from both the SHA and BAA.

Following morning refreshments and a warm welcomed to the meeting by SHA chairperson Gerard Gilligan, and after certain housekeeping notices, plus announcements, the first speaker for the day was introduced. Dr. Emily Winterburn *FRAS*, teacher, historian and author was recently appointed as a Vice-President of the SHA and was one of many instrumental in the Society being established in 2002, serving on the first SHA council as its first Chairperson. Her presentation concerned the launch and introduction to a major project in collaboration with a group of academics to seeking out lost women and helping researchers & educators to find and locate archives, objects needed to tell their stories. Dr Winterburn explained the information and details requested and the overall aims of what it is hoped to be a major resource for historians of not just astronomy but also all associated sciences.



A project the SHA will support and assist with during the next few months, and perhaps years. Dr Winterburn's presentation generated several questions and also additional lines of enquire which were discussed during the rest of the day. Next on the speakers timetable was Bill Barton *FRAS* , a SHA member but also recently appointed Deputy Director of the British Astronomical Association (BAA) Historical Section. For many years Bill has been researching astronomical history linked to his home country of Suffolk. In 2017 and 2019 I was awarded the Society for the History of Astronomy Roger Jones Award for contributions to the SHA County Survey of Astronomers. He recently had two papers published, one the BAA Journal and the other in the SHA's Antiquarian Astronomer.



Figure 8. Alice Grace Cook in her observing deck chair, pictured for the Daily Mirror, 1918 Jun 19.

His presentation to-day entitled “*Beer, Bread and Bolides*” concerned local astronomer Alice Grace Cook *FRAS* (1877 – 1958), from Stowmarket, Suffolk. A highly skilled and dedicated observer. Ms Cook became a prominent member of the BAA from 1911 and in 1916 one of the first female fellows of the Royal Astronomical Society. She became an accomplished meteor observer, comets and of novae. She also took an interest in the study of atmospheric phenomena, for example zodiacal light and aurora. She served as the Director of the BAA's Meteor Section from 1921-23. Bill's presentation was a fine and excellent example of local research, using a person's own time and resources, but also sharing that researches either in written form or in this case via an excellent and well received spoken presentation.

Image above of Alice Grace Cook in her Observing chair © 1928 Daily Mirror & BAA archives.

During the lunch break delegates were able to purchase second hand astronomy books, and also visit the recently relocated SHA library, situated within the BMI building. The Library still regarded as one of the largest single subject libraries in Europe houses over 3,000 books and many other astronomical history related articles, publications and leaflets, both from the UK and all over the world. Mid-day Refreshments were taken in the small but well-appointed BMI cafeteria, which was opened specially for the spring meeting and its delegates.



Library Image: James Dawson.



Guest speakers for the SHA March 2022 Conference. L to R Bill Barton *FRAS*, Ms Hilary Forbes, Dr Emily Winterburn *FRAS*, & Dr Lee Macdonald *FRAS*. Image: Gerard Gilligan.

Once the delegates were refreshed, rested, and watered, the first speaker after the lunch break was SHA member Dr Lee Macdonald *FRAS*. Lee is yet another renowned historian and author. Previously a deputy director of the BAA historical section, Lee is one of two Sackler Research Fellows working with Royal Museums Greenwich, researching the twentieth-century history of Greenwich Observatory. His well-researched and presented talk asked why the Royal Observatory



was not moved away from London earlier than the 1940's and also discussed proposals to move the observatory back in the nineteenth century. Lee also explained problems encountered by the RGO astronomers and scientists was not just governmental red tape, but also the ever changing London skyline overlooking the River Thames, and the expansion of the city and it's many docks, plus the smoke from numerous industrial and domestic chimneys.

Image of RGO: Surface. View



The next to speak was Hilary Forbes, another SHA member. Hilary's background is in teaching astronomy at GCSE level for thirteen years in further education, and another twenty four years teaching mathematics in schools and later in HE. Hilary has recently become increasingly fascinated with astronomers of Ancient Greece and Rome, and following a Master degree in Classical Studies with the OU.

Her presentation was a review of her MA dissertation about Aristarchus of Samos 310 c – 250 BC and his own heliocentric proposal for our own solar system, which may have been overlooked in many history articles and books. Aristarchus involvement has been re-evaluated by Hilary with reference to much evidence and the significance of that evidence. *Aristarchus calculations of Sun, Earth and Moon relative sizes.* Image Wikipedia

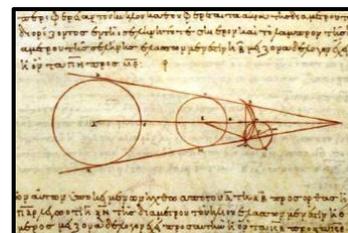


Image of Hilary Forbes; Gerard Gilligan.



Following a much welcome tea and coffee break, with associated cake to refresh the brain cells, the final speaker for the day was Gerard Gilligan, the current Chairperson of the SHA. Gerard, (a late replacement for SHA President Allan Chapman), has been closely associated with Liverpool Astronomical Society as a member for almost forty years, serving on the Society council in the past as Hon. Secretary and President. He has a particular interest in researching local astronomical history individuals, observatories and perhaps local long forgotten astronomy clubs and

groups. His presentation and talk was the story of a telescope and two local school/seminary astronomical observatories run and maintained by staff and students at St. Edwards RC College, Liverpool and later at the larger RC seminary at Upholland Lancashire. The talk was an excellent example of the information compiled from local libraries and archives, and later with the help of other SHA members and experts the present location of the associated 7.5 inch OG. Cooke telescope. Sadly Gerard also explained and illustrated the sad end of the observatory at Upholland once the seminary was forced to close due to falling student numbers and increased school running costs. Gerard then brought the very enjoyable day's events and lectures to an end, thanking all involved.

Above Image: SHA President Dr Allan Chapman, with SHA Chairperson Gerard Gilligan © 2017 Liverpool AS

This spring meeting of the SHA may have been regarded as poorly attended, but was viewed as an experiment and part of the society coming out of the pandemic restrictions during its twentieth year. So that face to face events can be organised again, and members can decide for themselves to meet once again and catch-up. The SHA council therefore would like to thank everyone involved in making the welcome back conference a great success. In particular our appreciation to the BMI venue staff for their tremendous assistance and cooperation. The meeting was also well received by delegates, but special thanks go to all those delegates, SHA members who gave their support and travelled from all parts of the UK to attend. Proof if needed that the society may have been in lock down for two years, but was never shut down. We now look forward to the autumn conference to take place once again at the BMI on 22nd October 2022. See you there!